



Explo Systems Investigation

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Doyline, LA (AP) -

The explosives recycling company that caused the evacuation of a Louisiana town has come under scrutiny for explosions and its handling of dangerous materials before, and it was so far behind on its rent that the Louisiana National Guard refused to lease it more space.

Explode Systems Inc. was cited for safety violations by the federal government in 2007 for its use of old Army explosives in mining operations in West Virginia, where a blast with "outdated deteriorated military ordnance" injured one worker and exposed others to toxins. The company had fallen hundreds of thousands of dollars behind on its rent at a Louisiana National Guard base even as it processed an Army contract to demilitarize hundreds of thousands of propelling charges used for artillery.

The company's most recent problems began with an explosion in October at that northern Louisiana facility. Authorities investigating the blast found an estimated 6 million pounds of a propellant called M6 — used for artillery rounds — haphazardly stored. Some boxes were stacked in buildings, some were packed into long corridors that connect the buildings and still more were found stashed outside. Some of the containers were spilling open.

Authorities feared that ignition of any of the propellant could set off a massive chain reaction that would race through the corridors and blow up multiple buildings, threatening the town of Doyline. Its 800 residents were put under a voluntary evacuation order for several days ending late last week, with kids out of school and some people living at camp sites in a nearby state park. The company is now under a criminal investigation for its storage of the materials, which have are being secured.

Lt. Col. Michael Kazmierzak, a Louisiana National Guard spokesman, said Explo officials asked earlier this year to lease more space at the base but that the request was turned down because the company was roughly \$400,000 behind on rent. He said the company never again brought up the need for more space, but the Guard eventually worked out a payment plan for the rent that was owed. He said Explo has made at least one payment under that plan.

State Police spokeswoman Julie Lewis has said the materials found outside appeared to have been "hidden" among trees. It's not clear if they were put there after the National Guard refused to give the company more space.

Explo Systems has not responded to numerous messages. An attorney who has represented the company declined to comment when a reporter visited his office last week in Shreveport.

Webster Parish Sheriff Gary Sexton said Tuesday that Explo's owners have not been in contact with authorities and there has been limited communications with the company's attorneys.

"They wish this thing would go away, but it's not going to," Sexton said.

The October explosion wasn't the first at the Explo facility. A series of at least 10 explosions there in 2006 caused an evacuation of Doyline, shut down Interstate 20 and forced officials to move students to schools in a nearby town, Sexton has said.

The company also came under scrutiny in West Virginia where it was using an old military explosive called tetryl in mountaintop removal mining for Catenary Coal Co. in 2006 and 2007, according to documents reviewed by The Associated Press. A February 2007 blast injured one worker and exposed others to toxins. Some of the tetryl dated back to 1940.

Among the allegations in the reports, federal regulators said Explo used a Chevy pickup truck to haul 350,000 pounds of the explosives around the mine site, but the vehicle did not have "suitable sides to confine" the loads. On one trip, about eight wooden boxes fell out of the truck, broke open and spilled explosives on the ground. The company also failed to properly separate explosives and detonators while hauling the material, the report said.

Explo Systems "displayed a reckless disregard for the health and safety of miners and by giving no consideration to the mining laws applicable to these activities," the Mine Safety and Health Administration said in report dated April 3, 2007.

The report said Explo was working as a contractor at the mine.

The company paid fines of \$2,000 for each of at least three violations related to the handling and transporting of explosives, according to federal records.

West Virginia mine safety officials also said Explo violated state regulations, but it wasn't immediately clear what penalties the state may have imposed.

Some workers filed lawsuits claiming the exposure to tetryl made them sick. The substance can cause symptoms including nosebleeds, yellowing of the skin, headaches and, in prolonged exposure, liver damage, according the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Explo Systems had planned to use more than a million pounds of tetryl for mining, according to the federal report. That would have enabled the company to dispose of outdated explosives for the Department of Defense while also making money from the mining industry.

Explo Systems, which was registered in Louisiana in 2001, has made millions from contracts with the military. Last year, the company listed its annual revenue as \$3 million with 70 employees, according to the Federal Procurement Data System.

The Army awarded Explo Systems a contract in 2010 to demilitarize hundreds of thousands of propelling charges for artillery rounds. The contract was for \$2.9 million with options for renewal for four years. The contract called for the demilitarization of as many as 450,000 propelling charges per year. Demilitarizing explosives generally entails changing a device or chemical in a way that it can't be used for battle.

Stephen Abney, a spokesman for the Army's Joint Munitions Command, said it's possible the M6 at the site came from the Army propellant charges, but he couldn't be sure.

Abney said Explo requested on Nov. 27 that the government hold all shipments because Louisiana authorities would not allow them to receive it until inspections and investigations have been completed. *approved permit*

Abney said the Army is gathering information about the events in Louisiana to help it decide whether to continue the contract.

The contract also raises questions about what Explo told the Army when bidding on the job and in subsequent reports. The solicitation for the contract required the company to provide "a detailed description of storage capacity."

A July 2011 report from the Government Accountability Office related to a dispute between Explo Systems and General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems Inc., over a military contract said the military rated Explo Systems' safety approach as "good." It was rated "satisfactory" in areas like its program management plan and "exceptional" for past performance. It wasn't clear from the report if the 2006 explosion in Louisiana or the problems in West Virginia were taken into account as part of that assessment.

The Explo facility is located on Camp Minden, a Louisiana National Guard base. The U.S. government had acquired the land in 1941 to build the Louisiana Army Ammunition Plant. It was handed over the state of Louisiana in 2005. Because it was set up as a munitions factory, the site was suitable for private companies in the explosives business.

Kazmierzak, the Guard spokesman, said Explo is responsible for cleaning up its mess.

"As a commercial tenant, they are responsible for all their operations and abiding by the laws and regulations, both state and federal. It's upsetting that they would allow this to occur," he said.

Authorities had said it's not clear exactly what Explo was planning to do with the estimated 6 million pounds of propellant that prompted the evacuation, though some experts say it can be used in the manufacturing of explosives in the mining industry.

Authorities say the explosions at the Louisiana facility in October and in 2006 were caused by a different kind of material.

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